

# **Strengthening International NGO Partnerships on Disaster Responses – Lessons from 3/11**

Background Paper  
(Draft)

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## **Introduction**

In the wake of the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, hundreds of Japanese and overseas organizations teamed up to support the disaster response. For many of these groups, this was a one-time effort in response to a calamity of unthinkable proportions—in fact, one so extraordinary that it came to be known simply as 3/11. But, for a number of these groups, especially Japanese and Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)<sup>1</sup> involved in disaster relief and a range of philanthropic and other civil society organizations that can play specialized roles in supporting humanitarian responses, 3/11 provided the impetus to forge international partnerships that can improve our capacity to save lives, decrease suffering, and accelerate recovery after future disasters. This paper focuses primarily on how international partnerships among these organizations can be strengthened.

Recent trends suggest the time is ripe for deeper and more effective nongovernmental cooperation on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. In the past two decades, NGOs have quietly become more central players in large-scale disaster responses around the world. For instance, after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, nearly 40 percent of all overseas funding was channeled through NGOs for implementation.<sup>2</sup> Seven years later, overseas NGOs and other civil society organizations mobilized substantially more funds for Japan's 3/11 response than all foreign governments and UN agencies combined.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the threat of natural and manmade disasters has grown, particularly in East Asia. Of course, the region has always been disaster prone. Over the 30-year period up until 2011, 55 percent of people affected by disasters lived in East Asia, and the region accounted for 42 percent of worldwide economic damages stemming from disasters, a staggering US\$893 billion.<sup>4</sup> But now, climate change, rapid urbanization, and the shift of populations to coastal areas are putting more and more people in Asia at risk. Indeed, a 2013 study by the insurance firm Swiss Re finds that 7 of the top 10 urban areas worldwide that face the greatest risk from disaster are in East Asia.<sup>5</sup>

These trends mean that there is greater potential than ever for partnerships between Japanese and Western civil society organizations to improve humanitarian responses in Asia, as well as those to future disasters in Japan, the United States, and the other home countries of the NGOs active in the 3/11 response. Realizing this potential, however, requires us to learn from what worked in the 3/11 response, what failed, and how Japanese NGOs and those in the United States and other Western countries can strengthen the foundations for international partnerships.

## **Characteristics of International Civil Society Partnerships After 3/11**

On March 11, 2011, immediately after news broke of the massive 9.0 magnitude earthquake, humanitarian assistance NGOs and other groups outside of Japan began to mobilize, in some instances putting staff on planes to Tokyo within hours. A handful reached out to longtime partner organizations in Japan with offers of support, but in many cases overseas groups had to scramble to make new connections with organizations in Japan that they could team up with on the response. For most, this proved to be a challenging task. Even among Japan experts and humanitarian professionals outside of Japan, there was little systematic knowledge concerning Japan's disaster relief organizations and, more broadly, about the state of its nonprofit sector.

Meanwhile, thousands of organizations around the world, from small community groups to massive humanitarian agencies, had begun to launch fundraising campaigns for Japan. The outpouring of overseas giving proved to be more generous than almost anybody anticipated. Ultimately, well over US\$1 billion was donated from outside of Japan for the disaster response, with more than US\$710 million being given by Americans alone.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in many cases, getting these funds to Japanese groups on the ground also turned out to be more complicated than the campaign organizers initially assumed, as Western groups' unfamiliarity with Japanese civil society and the limited capacity of Japanese nonprofits made it difficult to identify how best to utilize the funds that had been raised.

In the end, numerous Western and Japanese groups managed to partner with one another, and many of these partnerships have made valuable contributions to the recovery of the Tohoku region. These partnerships have tended to follow one or more of the following patterns:

**1) Overseas grantmaking to Japanese groups engaged in rescue, relief, or recovery**

The bulk of overseas nongovernmental support for the 3/11 response consisted of funds provided to Japanese civil society organizations. A small portion of this was given as donations (*kifukin*) that required minimal paperwork and that Japanese groups were free to use as they wished. But most took the form of grants (*joseikin*, etc.) that were designated for a specific purpose and that enabled overseas funders to report back to the original donors about how their money had been used. These required a deeper relationship—in other words, a degree of partnership—that was more intensive than a simple one-time transfer of funds. It also placed a greater burden on both sides. In most cases, these grants necessitated considerable interaction between Japanese recipients and overseas funders to develop appealing programs that suited the aims of both sides, and they also imposed a degree of accountability on the Japanese recipients to the overseas donors.

**2) Overseas funding through affiliates and intermediaries**

Prior to 3/11, a number of the large, internationally-oriented humanitarian NGOs had affiliates in Japan, many of which operated as fundraising arms and a handful of which were larger and more diversified in function. The presence of these sister organizations made it relatively easy for overseas groups to raise funds that could be handed over to their Japanese counterparts, in some instances with most decisions on the usage entrusted

**Why just “Western” groups?**

NGOs and other civil society organizations from around the world raised funds and made other invaluable contributions to the 3/11 response. However, with some important exceptions, there were considerable differences in the approaches taken by Western (or at least “Westernized”) groups and by groups from Asian countries and elsewhere. For example, organizations in South Korea, Taiwan, and China raised large amounts of funds for Japan. These were typically given to Japanese organizations as one-off donations (*kifukin*) that required minimal collaboration and repeated interaction between the Japanese recipient and overseas donor. However, many of the organizations from North America and Europe that played the largest roles in the 3/11 response tended to provide their support as structured grants (*joseikin*, etc.) that required more intensive collaboration on program aims and methods or, in many cases, through joint programs carried out in cooperation with local Japanese groups. As a result, the interactions between many Western and Japanese organizations entailed a deeper type of involvement and have a greater potential to develop into more sustained partnerships.

to the judgment of the Japanese affiliate and in other cases with much more intensive involvement by the overseas donors in the disposition of the funds. Numerous well-known groups—the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Salvation Army, Save the Children, World Vision, and so on—operated in this manner. However, even despite their familiarity with one another and longstanding commitment to work together, many of these relationships came under considerable stress in the aftermath of 3/11. Some affiliates even agreed that it would be more effective to work with outside partners rather than with one another in supporting the disaster recovery—for instance, much of the funds from Catholic Relief Services in the United States were not channeled through its official affiliate, Caritas Japan, but rather were deployed in cooperation with other organizations.

A somewhat similar pattern emerged in which overseas donors channeled funding to the disaster zone through philanthropic intermediaries based in Japan, some of which had a long track record and others of which were newly established in response to the disaster. For instance, the Japan Society of New York provided substantial support to the Japan NPO Center to be regranted to small NPOs, while the Japan Society of the United Kingdom partnered with the Sanaburi Foundation in Sendai to create what is essentially a donor advised fund that distributes grants to groups throughout the disaster zone. In many cases, the flow of funding became quite complex. The Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/USA) collected funds from hundreds of individuals and groups in the United States, many of which were already amalgamating funds for other, even smaller donors, then transferred them to JCIE/Japan, its Japanese partner, which regranted the funds to expand the institutional capacity of a range of organizations in the disaster zone.

### ***3) Joint programs by overseas and Japanese partners***

While many Western NGOs refrained from dispatching staff to Japan in the way that they normally would for a disaster in a developing country, a number eventually posted staff to Japan or regularly rotated them through the region in order to have more control over their relief and recovery efforts. In almost all instances, they found it was necessary to team up with local Japanese organizations in order to navigate the intricacies of Japanese society and to access the manpower, skills, and local knowledge to effectively implement their programs. Most of these collaborative efforts relied on the overseas partner for funding and the Japanese partner for implementation, but they tended to involve sufficient collaboration in all stages of project formulation and implementation to be considered joint efforts.

Some notable examples include the collaboration between Mercy Corps and Peace Winds Japan, two organizations that had a relationship that predated 3/11, as well as two new cooperative efforts by the International Rescue Committee with AAR Japan and JEN [Japan Emergency NGO], groups that had not worked together before the disaster but eventually entered into formal partnership agreements after two years of joint activities.

### ***4) Technical assistance***

Western groups have also supported Japanese responders by providing technical assistance, often as part of programs that simultaneously entailed funding or joint work in the disaster zone. The example of how Safecast, a US-based organization, assisted Japanese groups working in Fukushima by providing radiation monitoring technology and support in mapping radiation hotspots is well known, as are the many cases in which overseas groups shared their expertise in PTSD and mental health counseling. Numerous

groups have also teamed up with Japanese partners to support the development of Japan's nonprofit sector after 3/11 by providing training and resources on project development, grant writing, evaluation methods, and overall nonprofit capacity building.

In the end, these various types of partnership have played an important role in the Tohoku region's recovery and have typically been rewarding for both sides. Most, though, have tended to require more work than anticipated and have necessitated repeated recalibrations on both sides to overcome gaps in mutual understanding, work culture, and institutional capacity. In many instances, the Japanese and Western partners have differing evaluations of their partnerships, even when both sides bring indispensable expertise to the table and share a commitment to working together and gratitude for what their counterpart is doing.

Any good marriage requires that both parties acknowledge and face up to the frustrations and challenges with their spouse. Therefore, in order to better identify where perceptions differ among Western and Japanese organizations cooperating in the 3/11 response and explore how international NGO partnerships can be strengthened, the authors have met with nearly 30 senior staff from Japanese and Western organizations, both in a roundtable setting and through one-on-one interviews. The following summarizes some of the common themes and challenges that emerged in these discussions.

### **Perspectives on Western Organizations' Roles in International Partnerships**

When assessing international partnerships, Japanese organizations tend to express happiness with their overseas counterparts, but after some prodding, many acknowledge significant gaps in expectations and differences in thinking that have made international partnerships challenging.

#### ***Praise for Overseas Partners***

As a rule, Japanese organizations are immensely appreciative of the generosity of overseas groups and moved by the caring and sense of solidarity they witnessed among their counterparts. This feeling of gratitude runs so deep that a number of Japanese organizations have looked for ways to return the kindness of their overseas partners—for instance by trying to contribute to the response to Hurricane Sandy in the United States—even while recognizing that their aid's greatest impact is likely to be in symbolic terms.

Japanese groups also consistently express their admiration for the level of professionalism that they see among Western humanitarian NGOs. Many find the institutional, staff, and financial capacity of Western nonprofit organizations to be enviable, and they believe that there are numerous lessons they should learn from their overseas counterparts about nonprofit management and disaster responses, even when they feel that what works overseas will not necessarily work in the Japanese context.

Several Japanese NGO leaders remarked that, of all of their donors, domestic and international, humanitarian organizations from Western countries—and particularly from the United States—have been the easiest to work with, both in terms of providing funding and in operating joint programs. This is because they tend to understand the need for flexibility in the use of funds and have been willing to trust the judgment of the Japanese NGOs to allocate funds and adjust programs to meet changing needs on the ground.

### ***Challenges to Mutual Understanding***

As with any partnership, though, Japanese organizations have faced a number of challenges in working together with their Western counterparts. One major issue they grapple with is the sense that their overseas counterparts did not fully understand the dynamics of Japanese civil society, how Japanese nonprofit organizations operate, and the degree to which Japanese NGOs need to keep in mind their complex relationships with other domestic organizations. For example, several Japanese NGO leaders commented that, in the 3/11 response, overseas groups have consistently underestimated the amount of time and effort that is needed to build up trust, both among key stakeholders in local communities in the disaster zone and with their operational partners. Japanese nonprofit leaders share their counterparts' frustration with how slowly things move, but often feel that Western groups do not sufficiently grasp just how much behind-the-scenes work is necessary in Japan to push forward measures that may seem relatively simple and straightforward from the outside.

Even while they are highly self-critical of the shortcomings of their own organizations, Japanese nonprofit leaders also sense that overseas groups do not fully understand how difficult it is for them to expand their organization's capacity. For instance, many Japanese NGO leaders feel that one of their organization's greatest weaknesses is a lack of professionalized staff, but they also worry that overseas groups tend to underestimate the difficulties of ameliorating this problem. As means of illustration, one Japanese manager remarked that it is nice of an overseas partner to offer one or two years' worth of salary support to hire another skilled staff member, but Westerners do not realize that in the Japanese system it is difficult to accept this because there then is an obligation to support this person for as many years as they wish to stay at their post.

The gap in understanding between Japanese and overseas NGOs also seems to extend to thinking about the formal international partnerships that a number of groups have forged. While Westerners often have a level of comfort with contracts, MOUs, and other inter-organizational agreements, Japanese groups tend to be made nervous by legalistic writing and feel that terms of formal agreements need to be given very serious scrutiny (to a degree that is often seen as overly serious by Western counterparts).

Beyond the cultural differences in approaches to formal agreements, Japanese NGO leaders feel that the Western side sometimes underestimates the costs of engaging in institutionalized partnerships. Japanese groups can be sensitive that an official agreement with a larger, richer Western organization might inevitably push them into a more junior or subsidiary role, despite their own organizational legacy and track record, and they can also be wary of feeling tied down to a relationship with just one organization. In addition, some leaders feel that working with US organizations means giving up a degree of neutrality when responding to humanitarian crises overseas. While they are delighted to partner with American groups in many parts of the world, these leaders sense that it may be disadvantageous to be seen as being affiliated with US NGOs when working in countries such as Myanmar or Vietnam, to say nothing of Afghanistan or Pakistan.

### ***Differing Work Cultures***

Another area where Japanese nonprofit officials sometimes feel a gap with their Western colleagues is in how each interacts with one another. Sometimes this is simply a matter of style. Even in Japan's civil society sector, interactions tend to be more formalized than in the West and sometimes this clash of styles can be off-putting, even for Japanese NGO leaders who have operated in international circles for many years. For example, in Japanese work

culture, rather than dispatching junior staff to meetings, it is customary for the heads of organizations to meet face-to-face with their partners as a sign of respect, but Western NGOs tend to feel less need for such protocol and hierarchy. In a similar vein, one Japanese NGO leader remarked how surprised she was to first show up for an important meeting with Western NGOs and find the Japanese all wearing suits and ties while the Westerners came in jeans with backpacks.

In other cases, the differences are more a matter of tone. While professing their admiration for their American counterparts and noting how much they would like to learn from their example, a number of Japanese NGO leaders registered their discomfort with the assumption that Western groups' role is to teach Japanese NGOs, even while appreciating their partners' eagerness to share what they believe is the right path. These leaders tend to feel that, while there are many lessons that they can take from the Western experience and there is much that Western NGOs can do to be supportive, it ultimately is the responsibility of Japanese themselves to develop and professionalize their civil society sector.

### ***Operational Gaps***

Moving to more concrete matters, many Japanese NGO leaders argue that one of the greatest problems they have faced in partnerships has been the pressure to move too quickly in implementing projects and spending down funds. Japanese organizations face similar pressures from domestic and international funders to disburse money quickly, but while many felt that this could be expected from Japanese donors with a less sophisticated understanding of nonprofit management and disaster responses, their Western partners should better understand the need to take more deliberate approaches and concentrate on funding for the long term. They had hoped that Western groups could be firmer in resisting donor pressures and convince their supporters to allow funds to be used over a longer period in order to have a more sustainable response.

Many Japanese nonprofit staff also note that their overseas partners tend to underestimate the amount of time and energy needed for partnerships, particularly since it is typically the Japanese partner that has to operate in a foreign language, translate documents into English, and spend considerable time explaining the complexities of Japanese society to their overseas counterparts. In particular, meeting the accountability and transparency standards that many Western organizations take for granted requires considerable effort for Japanese groups, which are accustomed to domestic modes of reporting that value different criteria. (For example, Japanese NGOs are accustomed to presenting meticulous reporting of precise expenditures and tend to avoid taking credit for developments that can only be partially ascribed to their actions, while Western organizations place greater emphasis in reporting on program impact and are more comfortable claiming credit for playing a role in positive developments that can reasonably be explained by multiple factors.) Furthermore, given how Japanese work culture obligates senior staff to represent the organization, the burden of dealing with Western partners typically falls on the highest-ranking and busiest people in the office.

Finally, the gap in external communications and marketing capacity between Japanese and Western groups can leave some Japanese organizations feeling overshadowed in their partnerships. Western NGOs have stronger systems for disseminating information on their activities, and there also is a much higher value placed on branding and other efforts to gain publicity in the United States and elsewhere than there is in Japan. Some Japanese nonprofit organizations feel that Western groups garner most of the publicity from joint efforts for

themselves with less credit going to the Japanese partners. In fact, the degree to which some Western groups advertise their activities would normally be seen as distasteful in Japan's nonprofit culture, and Japanese nonprofit organizations feel that attempting to compete with their Western partners by touting their own contributions in a similar way may end up antagonizing the partners that they have to rely upon permanently in their day-to-day work—namely, other Japanese organizations.

### **Perspectives on Japanese Organizations' Roles in International Partnerships**

Meanwhile, representatives of Western organizations have high praise for Japanese responders, but mixed feelings about the state of partnerships with Japanese groups. On the one hand, they report that they have found Japan to be an especially challenging place in which to operate, in large part because it already has well-developed societal systems and structures that they do not fit into or fully understand. A number of organizations with long track records in international responses—and, in some cases, a deep understanding of Japan—attest to finding Japan to be one of the most difficult places in the world to find partners to which they can provide funds. But on the other hand, when Western groups have succeeded in forging partnerships, these tend to be much more rewarding and longer lasting than elsewhere, and their Japanese partners often outperform their expectations.

#### ***Admiration for the Work of Japanese Nonprofits***

The representatives of Western NGOs and philanthropic organizations involved in the 3/11 response tend to have deep admiration for the staff of the Japanese groups they have dealt with, describing their work as “heroic” and “tireless.” Many who have been dealing directly with Japanese partners have developed strong personal connections to their colleagues and consider them to be lifelong friends.

Numerous motivations have been behind the eagerness of Western groups to work more closely with Japanese nonprofits. In the initial days after 3/11, many Western NGO leaders felt a strong connection to Japan and wanted to do whatever they could to help. At the same time, many of these groups had large amounts of money pouring in from donors who wanted them to play a role in the response, so they felt obligated to work with Japanese organizations in order to best utilize these funds while satisfying their donors.

As time has passed, some humanitarian NGOs have also focused more on the long-term strategic benefits of partnering with Japanese groups. In addition to learning from experienced Japanese organizations about how to respond to a mega-disaster in a highly developed country, some also have felt that Japanese and Western NGOs can complement one another by working together on humanitarian and development initiatives in other countries, such as Myanmar and Vietnam. These NGOs are under pressure to maximize their resources and impact, so they tend to see greater cooperation as an important strategy for their future activities. Finally, some Western NGOs hope to partner with Japanese groups in order to access Japanese government and corporate funding in a way that will benefit both sides.

#### ***Concerns about Japan's Weak Nonprofit Sector***

The relatively underdeveloped state of Japan's civil society has been a major obstacle to international partnerships. Especially in the early days, Western groups were hampered by a lack of familiarity with the Japanese nonprofit sector and a paucity of personal connections with Japanese NGOs. Other than those like the Japanese Red Cross that operate as affiliates of broader networks, only one or two indigenous Japanese organizations' names were



recognized in international circles of humanitarian NGOs, and just a handful of Japanese NGO leaders were widely known overseas.

The low international profile of Japanese NGOs was clearly due, in part, to their limited number, size, and institutional capacity. As a result, many Western groups tried to get in touch with the same Japanese NGO leaders, quickly overloading them. A similar phenomenon emerged in terms of overseas funding. As one Japanese NGO leader recounted, as soon as a Japanese group gained a reputation as being capable and responsive, a range of Western organizations rushed to work with them and provide funding, overwhelming their institutional capacity and eroding the very traits that made them attractive and effective partners in the first place.

Once Western groups began working with Japanese nonprofits, they also found their attempts to operate in Japan hampered by the lack of a strong support system for humanitarian NGOs. For instance, internationally minded humanitarian NGOs in the United States and Europe are used to working at home with coordinating bodies such as InterAction or CONCORD (European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development) and in developing countries with UN-led donor roundtables. However, in Japan there was no established mechanism to facilitate coordination for them with one another and with Japanese NGOs. To some degree, this arose because it was nearly unprecedented to have such a large international response to a disaster in a developed country, but clearly the lack of a strong nonprofit infrastructure was an important factor. Moreover, even when Western organizations could engage in a degree of coordination and link up with potential partners, managing the politics of relationships within Japan's nonprofit sector proved to be a considerable challenge.

### ***Faulty Communications among Partners***

From the start, many Western groups also grappled to understand why communications with their Japanese partners were so difficult. This was not merely an issue of the limited number of Japanese NGO staff with strong English ability, but also a problem of expectations about what, when, and how to communicate with one another. Western groups operating from Tokyo or overseas complain that it was challenging to find out from Japanese counterparts what the real needs on the ground were with a degree of specificity. They often went long periods without communications because their Japanese counterparts felt that they should not be in touch unless they had finished preparing a comprehensive and polished memo or document on the topic at hand while the Western groups were hoping for more frequent updates, even if they were incomplete and not perfectly crafted.

In particular, Western NGOs and other funders have faced difficulties in getting adequate reporting on the impact of their support, particularly compelling and concise "human stories" that they can share with their supporters. Representatives of several Western groups remark that, when they do site visits, they are often amazed by the impact that they see programs have on the ground, as well as by the sophistication of their approaches. However, in most cases, these successes are not sufficiently captured in the communications they receive from their Japanese partners, often leaving these achievements invisible to the outside world. Some note that there have been several prominent exceptions to this trend, praising the handful of Japanese NGOs that have assigned internationally trained staff to collect human interest stories and other indicators of impact and regularly feed these to their Western partners. Several Western groups cite such communications as an important factor in their decision to give greater funding to these groups.

### ***Gaps in Thinking***

Western groups have also found that their efforts to work with Japanese partners require considerable time and energy because of significant gaps in terms of how they think about their challenges. For instance, many feel that their Japanese partners tend to focus overly on process and insufficiently on impact. This attention to details rather than the big picture tends to manifest itself in project planning, and many Western groups consistently find the argumentation in their Japanese partners' project proposals to be of low quality. As one Western NGO representative noted, many of the Japanese organizations that she works with focus too much on "Do we have the right words in our proposal?" and not enough on "Does our argument and plan make sense?" Western groups tend to find similar problems with grant reporting, which often emphasizes outputs such as the number of events held rather than outcomes such as whether these succeeded in advancing broader goals.

Western partners also note that they sometimes feel that their partnerships are held back by the risk aversion of Japanese groups and their resistance to bend societal rules and improvise in order to push for the greater good. They have become accustomed to hearing "That will be difficult" and similar pessimistic terms from Japanese partners, and many attest to having a hard time in determining when these reactions reflect the fact that something truly will be impossible to achieve and when it merely represents a level of discomfort with an unfamiliar course of action or caution about not appearing to promise something that they are not absolutely certain they can deliver. Overall, they find that these types of attitudes as well as the need for numerous consensus-building consultations mean that moving things forward in the Japanese system requires a great deal of time and energy, and the challenges often wear down Western partners, even if the results are rewarding.

### ***Limitations in Institutional Capacity***

By a large margin, Western organizations seeking to work with Japanese groups tend to cite their greatest challenge as being the weak institutional capacity of potential Japanese partners in terms of finances, internal systems, and staff. Most Japanese nonprofits lack a strong funding base, and few have endowments or reserves like their Western counterparts, so Western groups worry whether the joint work they have supported will be sustainable when they can no longer provide the bulk of the funding. Almost all Japanese humanitarian groups also lack the internal systems and the level of specialization that are customary in Western nonprofits. Whereas Western humanitarian NGOs often have program staff that specialize narrowly on topics such as gender issues and psychosocial care and other staff that focus solely on communications, fundraising, or a range of administrative and back office operations, Japanese nonprofits are typically too small for their staff to specialize. This leaves many organizations overly dependent on the wits and stamina of a single charismatic leader, and it also makes it more difficult for them to meet the transparency and accountability standards that are considered customary in Europe or the Americas.

In particular, Western organizations find that the most daunting obstacle to stronger and more equal partnerships is the small staff size of Japanese nonprofits and, consequently, their limited staff capacity. For a Japanese NGO, a professional staff of 20 is thought of as large, while for American humanitarian NGOs, a staff of 50 is considered to be relatively small. This means that partnerships can often end up feeling lopsided. How can a Japanese organization like JEN, which has fewer than two dozen full-time staff, or Peace Winds Japan, with less than 40 staff in Japan, manage to partner on equal footing with a Western NGO like Mercy Corps, with its 4,500 staff or the International Rescue Committee, with more than 8,000 staff worldwide? The result is that Japanese nonprofit staff are perpetually

overextended, trying to do the work that would be covered by several staff members in their Western counterparts.

People involved in the 3/11 response cite a number of factors that have made it difficult for Japanese nonprofits to expand their staff in the way that Western NGOs have. Limited financial resources and the relative underdevelopment of philanthropy and fundraising in Japan are often pointed to as major culprits. Also, the lack of a clear career path for young NGO staff and a hierarchical culture in Japanese organizations that limits the degree of authority given to younger staff are often cited as a disincentive for talented young professionals to stay in the field.

In addition, there is a problem of high turnover among younger staff, who often work for Japanese humanitarian NGOs for several years before leaving for positions at Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) or UN agencies, where the salary and prestige are higher and working conditions less arduous. This phenomenon is particularly frustrating for Japanese NGO leaders, who feel that they have become a feeder system that trains staff for JICA and UN agencies, when they should instead be receiving support from those agencies to help strengthen their institutional capacity and become more professionalized like their overseas counterparts.

### **Strengthening Partnerships After 3/11: Preliminary Thoughts**

Despite their challenges, Western and Japanese NGO leaders tend to give high marks to their own partnerships, and many feel that it is important to expand and consolidate them. Those involved in the 3/11 response note that there are a number of steps that can be taken to help Japanese and Western organizations operate more effective and sustainable partnerships. The following is an incomplete list of some initial ideas that have been raised in the course of this study:

#### ***Deepen Mutual Understanding***

- It will help if more Japanese NGO leaders could operate professionally in English, and Western NGOs should take steps to ensure that they have staff with better Japanese language ability and a deeper familiarity with Japanese society and professional practices.
- Despite the mismatch in size and resources between Western and Japanese NGOs, which is likely to persist in the future, Western groups need to continue to recognize that a sense of equality is essential for successful partnerships.
- Greater efforts can be made to educate Western NGO leaders and experts on the challenges that Japanese groups face in partnering with them. One measure that might help is a series of case studies of successful and unsuccessful partnerships between Western and Japanese groups in the 3/11 response.

#### ***Strengthen Personal Ties and Networks***

- Although limited staff capacity makes it difficult for Japanese NGO leaders to sacrifice the time to participate in international forums with Western humanitarian NGOs, greater representation from the Japanese nonprofit sector would be useful. Modest funding for travel costs could make it easier for Japanese representatives to participate more actively in international networks.
- Deeper involvement by Japanese and Western NGO representatives in regional networking initiatives in Asia would be beneficial.

### ***Deepen Institutional Linkages***

- One of the best ways that Japanese and Western NGOs can further build familiarity, strengthen ties among personnel, and learn more about one another's work methods and styles is by continuing to work side-by-side on concrete projects. Pursuing joint projects in Asia and elsewhere in the fields of development issues or disaster risk reduction can allow Western and Japanese NGOs to consolidate their partnerships, and funders can play a strategic role in encouraging this. For example, Japanese and US government agencies (JICA, MOFA, USAID, etc.) can build upon past US-Japan development cooperation by providing matching ODA funding for initiatives that require Japanese and American humanitarian NGOs to work together in third countries.
- Also, through the process of undertaking joint studies to compile lessons from the 3/11 response for future disaster responses, Japanese and Western organizations can grow closer. Ripe areas for joint studies include 1) lessons for international responses to humanitarian emergencies in developed countries and 2) lessons regarding emergency responses to radiological emergencies.
- Formal partnership agreements may be a useful tool to outline areas of potential cooperation during "peacetime." Some Western and Japanese groups have already been exploring this option.
- Personnel exchanges that place Japanese NGO leaders in partner organizations for an extended period of time so they can build personal ties and learn how Western NGOs function by working alongside Western colleagues are desirable, but they may not be realistic due to the fact that Japanese humanitarian NGOs already operate with so few staff. However, there may be merit in seconding representatives of Western humanitarian NGOs, particularly those with a prior familiarity with Japan, to the offices of their Japanese partners.
- With cooperation from GlobalGiving, Atlas Corps and the TOMODACHI Initiative have created a program to place young Japanese in the offices of US NGOs for 12 to 18 month fellowships, during which the fellows learn firsthand how Western NGOs function. The fellows are expected to return to Japan to look for work in the nonprofit sector. Expanding the scope and financing of programs like these to allow Japanese working in overseas NGOs to move into funded positions at specific Japanese organizations that are natural partners to their Western host organizations can help build institutional ties among Japanese and Western NGOs.

### ***Enhance Institutional and Financial Capacity to Partner***

- Greater exchanges between Japanese and Western NGOs—including study delegations—on technical issues such as project design, evaluation, etc., can help Japanese organizations bring their operations in line with international standards.
- Japanese and Western humanitarian NGOs might consider teaming up to seek funding from the Japanese government and private-sector donors for joint work in areas where Japanese groups can take advantage of their Western partner's presence and expertise on the ground. This benefits both sides by allowing them to access additional funding and can indirectly allow Japanese NGOs to expand their capacity.
- Japanese NGOs have much to learn from Western organizations about innovative ways to partner with corporate funders and other donors.
- Greater work can be done by Japanese NGOs to utilize overseas platforms (such as GlobalGiving, Give2Asia, etc.) that collect donations from individuals around the world. However, this should be done with realistic expectations about how much funding can be mobilized.

- Japanese government officials and representatives of Japanese NGOs can consult on ways to better prevent the hiring practices of JICA and other agencies from undermining the development of the nonprofit sector.

### ***Improve Communications***

- Japanese groups should consider assigning staff to focus specifically on international communications, striving not just to communicate more effectively in English, but also to adapt communications styles that are more familiar to people outside of Japan. The organizations should also consider putting greater effort into assessing and illustrating the impact of their programs by relaying human stories and also adopting more sophisticated evaluation techniques.
- Western organizations should be more aware of the unintended impact that their aggressive communications strategies have on their Japanese partnerships and be careful to ensure that Japanese partners feel sufficient ownership over their joint work.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In international discussions, the term “NGO” usually refers to a wide range of institutionalized nongovernmental and nonprofit groups, but it is worth noting that in Japanese, the acronym “NGO” is typically used only for larger nonprofits that focus specifically on overseas issues such as international development, while “NPO” is used more often for smaller, domestic-oriented nonprofit organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Flint and Hugh Goyder, *Funding the Tsunami Response* (London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, 2006), 27.

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan reports that there were 17.5 billion yen (US\$184 million at US\$1=95 yen) in cash donations by foreign governments, as well as a number of large in-kind donations. (The largest expenditures by foreign governments appear to be 40 billion yen (US\$420 million) in oil donated by Kuwait, the \$95 million that the US Congressional Research Service estimates was expended for Operation Tomodachi, and another 10,000 tons each of gasoline and diesel fuel at a market price of approximately US\$25~30 million that was donated by China.) Combined, the largest cash and in-kind donations from foreign governments total 67 billion yen or roughly US\$700 million.

In contrast, adding up the private giving from major donors tallied up in surveys by *Giving Japan 2012* and the Japan Center for International Exchange—US\$712.6 million (67.7 billion yen) from the United States, approximately US\$188 million (17.9 billion yen) from Taiwan, US\$47 million (4.5 billion yen) from Korea, US\$26 million (2.5 billion yen) from the United Kingdom, and US\$252 million (24 billion yen) that was collected by Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in other countries—indicates that at least 127 billion yen, (roughly US\$1.3 billion) came from overseas private donors.

Andrew Feickert and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *Japan 2011 Earthquake: US Department of Defense (DOD) Response* (CRS Report for Congress, No. 41690), Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Shogaikokura kara no bushi shien/kifukin* [In-kind and cash donations from various foreign countries], Ministry of Foreign Affairs website 2012; Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE), “US Giving for Japan Disaster Exceeds \$710 Million,” *Civil Society Monitor* (March 2013); and Japan Fundraising Association, *Kifu hakusho 2012/Giving Japan 2012* (Tokyo: Japan Business Federation, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Data is for the period 1982–2011 and is from EMDAT International Disaster Database, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Université Catholique de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium, [www.emdat.be](http://www.emdat.be).

<sup>5</sup> The report estimates that 7 of the top 10 cities with the largest numbers of people at risk for disaster are in East Asia. Swiss Re, “Mind the Risk: A Global Ranking of Cities Under Threat from Natural Disasters,” 2013, [http://media.swissre.com/documents/Swiss\\_Re\\_Mind\\_the\\_risk.pdf](http://media.swissre.com/documents/Swiss_Re_Mind_the_risk.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> JCIE, “US Giving for Japan Disaster Exceeds \$710 Million.”